# An Address

in memory of

## Major Edwin Hall Higley, L.L.D.

delivered by

The Rev. Sherrard Billings

in Groton School Chapel

June 4, 1922

on the occasion of the unveiling of a tablet to Major Higley

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Dear Brainerd

A Mr Gladwin who called on me this summer was connected with the Groton School and we chatted about Higley - He sent me this address - I've read it - and send it to you - if you have not seen it - you will enjoy reading it - Do what you please with it - Seems to me very appropriate to place it in the Coll - library

Clara + I start for the Pacific coast this (Sunday) afternoon

## In Memoriam

## EDWIN HALL HIGLEY

*Magistri huius Scholæ*

1885–1916

*hane tabulam sui collegæ dedicaverunt*

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We find this morning, on the walls of the Chapel, a tablet put up to the memory of one who was a master in this school for more than thirty years. He died only six years ago, and yet there is not a boy at Groton today who ever knew him; there are few who ever heard of him. One of the striking phenomena of this place is the rapidity with which generations come and go. Every few years we turn over the whole population; so that anyone who dies or even goes away for a while is quickly forgotten. And it is right that it should be so. Evidently nature intends that we should appear for a while on the scene and play our part and then disappear to make room for others. And I suspect over in the other world we shall be too busy with our work to be much concerned with the question of how long our name is remembered here.

And yet occasionally a great man appears in our midst whose memory it seems a pity to lose; who had, while he lived, permanent inspiration for those who knew him, inspiration which they would like if possible to pass on to others. That is my excuse today for preaching to you boys about Major Higley. Not only was he a great man in himself, but he stood for a type which we, in this part of the country at least, believe is the best type which has yet appeared in our American life.

The forebears of Edwin Higley—for we must begin far back in order to understand anyone like him, it takes many generations to make such a man—the forebears give us the familiar New England story at its best.

He was old New England, enriched with foreign culture, but with the native flavor full strength and unspoiled. His forebears were people whose primary aim was the training of their children. In the heathen lands of the east, ancestor-worship is common; in our part of the world, children-worship was universal. The race of old New England farmers rose early and worked late, that their sons might go to the academy and to college. Not that education in their eyes was of chief importance, but that education, added to austere moral and religious training, was most apt to make what they called good men; that is, loyal citizens and intelligent Christians. Goodness, in the atmosphere into which Edwin Higley was born and in which he was bred, was no aim for a weakling. The man who loved God with his heart and soul, and left out his mind, might hope for mercy in the other world—in this world he had failed. So those ancestors of Mr. Higley thought. They trained their children in ways of straight thinking, as well as straight living. In every village there were four important people—the first selectman, the Captain of the militia, the preacher, and the school-teacher. I suspect that order was often a climax of importance.

The first Higley ancestor to come to America landed in Connecticut in 1664. This young John Higley had run away from a cruel master in England, to whom he had been apprenticed, but after a few years in the new world, wanting to have a clean past, he went back to England and paid his old master the money that was still due. That shows a touch of character which you find running through all his descendants. You are impressed in reading the family book by the character of the men. And you are impressed too by their mental and physical vigor, for character is apt to mean vigor. Wherever they lived, they were men of importance in the community. There was no ne'er-do-well in the tribe, there was no sign of unworthy poverty. One likes the description of the old house in Connecticut where they lived. It was a good specimen, the book tells us, of a colonial homestead—"2 stories in front, while behind the rafters sloped down within 8 or 10 feet of the ground—the kind of roof called a lean-to. One massive chimney 12 feet square like a great tower in the center of the roof. The fireplace was 8 feet wide and several feet deep." "These homes," an American writer says, "had an air of domesticity—of large and elegant domesticity—but still they looked like homes, and homes of people of *sense* and taste and character."

There was nothing *effete* about life in early colonial times. The Indians kept the men in good condition, if anything was needed to keep them so. The people in *no* settlement in those days differed on the question of "Preparedness." "All persons above the age of 16 years," the law said, "except magistrates and church officials, shall beare arms. Every one shall have in continual readiness a good musket or other gun fit for service with a sword rest and ammunition kept in good order." They slept on their weapons and carried them to church. They were military if not war-like people.

The Higleys, you find, entered fully into the duties of the life of the time. They were officers of the militia, deputies to the General Assembly, and members of all important committees. They were big men. In the Higley book again and again, in different generations or in collateral branches, you come across the sentence, "He was a man of fine physique." There is a good picture of Edwin Higley's great-grandfather, who in 1779 moved from Connecticut up to Vermont. "He was at the time in the prime of his strong manhood, 6 feet tall, broad-shouldered, with high forehead, high cheek-bones, keen gray eyes, stern, grave face, tender heart of which he was a bit ashamed." The journey was made with the goods in ox-carts, and the mother and youngest children on horseback. The older ones walked with their father.

In Vermont they settled in a place called Castleton, where they bought one-third of the whole township and built the homestead. There for nearly 150 years the family have lived, and there in 1843 Edwin Higley was born. There were wonderful things in that part of the country round which the boy's early associations could cluster—the spacious, dignified brick house itself, the hills nearby and mountains in the distance, the brooks, the church, and the academy—good examples of colonial architecture. All those things must have had their influence on the growing boy. Those things account in part for what he was. "The dominant impression of Mr. Higley," a Groton graduate once wrote to me, "was solidity, a solidity of body and mind and character a sort of *four-squareness* that couldn't be upset. Long before I left school, I knew the difference between a man who specialized education, narrow at the base, served chiefly to cut him off from the interests of most of the world, and the man who, like Mr. Higley, had built his education broadly and thoroughly with a foundation broad enough to touch on all men's interests."



At the age of 17 the boy went to Middlebury, to the college where his father and uncles and brother had gone before him. But in 1861, at the very beginning of his sophomore year the cry ran through the north that more men were needed at the front, and he at once wrote home for permission to enlist. He and two friends volunteered. At a farewell dinner given to those three boys by their classmates, young Higley spoke as follows—notice the sanity that so early characterized him: "I believe," he said, "there is more work for me to do after the war is over. I do not go with the expectation of never coming back. I rely on God. If He wills that I survive, well; if not, 'tis well; I am ready to die. And if there is virtue in what I am doing, give some of the credit to my mother. She has just written to me: 'If you feel it your duty to go, I should be sorry to stand in your way. Go, and may God bless you, keep you, and bring you safely back, but especially may you be kept from the evil influences around you, and may you never allow a spirit of revenge to remain for a moment in your breast.' I go," young Higley added, "feeling that I am attended by my mother's blessing." It was a fine boy that could speak to his classmates so simply and so intimately of his mother, and it was a rare mother who, with her heart breaking over the danger to her boy's life, could pray most of all that evil influences should not hurt him—that no harm should come to his soul. Men of great character have always had great mothers. Not so much in Roman history should have been made of that story of the Gracchi. Of course they had a *Cornelia* for a mother. It is the rule.

Young Higley joined the I Regiment of Vermont Cavalry. That regiment has had a notable history. I find it said that next to Ethan Allen's Green Mountain Boys, the I Cavalry was Vermont's most famous regiment. Mounted on Morgan horses, with men picked as the most prominent of the entire state, the regiment was one which stirred the pride of Vermont and which throughout the war was most heartily welcomed in any command. Higley was at once elected Sergeant, soon was made Lieutenant, and later on for meritorious conduct, Captain, and finally Brevet Major.

I cannot tell you at this time of his gallantry, nor of the hardships he suffered. For nine months during the latter part of the war he was a prisoner, first at Andersonville, then at Charleston. In March, 1865, he was exchanged and sent north, and in May he was mustered out. When he arrived at home his mother did not recognize him. There was little left of the splendid young man who four years before had ridden away to the war. His mind too they feared for. For weeks and months he sat about in a stupor, but gradually, under the tender care of his family and his friends, he revived; and he was able in the autumn to take up his college studies again with something of his old vigor. On re-entering he claimed no academic credit for military service, such as was frequently allowed, but re-entered as a sophomore. He was after an education, not merely a degree. He led his class. An old Groton graduate the other day, speaking to me of him, burst out: "There must have been an awful lot of intellect somewhere in that family." Another graduate said, "In any company of great scholars Mr. Higley would have been a distinguished figure. None of the noted men with whom I studied later on after school at the university excelled him. No one of them indeed seemed to me so big and impressive a personality as he." There was an awful lot of intellect in that family, but it is hard to trace it to any particular source. Intellect was general among them. Perhaps the country helped. They got their strength from the hills. They got their single-mindedness too from them. They were not made superficial from the multifarious interests of city life.



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He graduated in 1868, and at first devoted himself to the teaching of music; for music was in his blood. Some years later at Leipzig in Germany a composition of his won the prize. And he was the first American to have a piece played by the Leipzig university orchestra.

A Grotonian writes of him: "I can bear certain witness to his love for literature, and into this his musical taste imperceptibly glided. He was particular enough about his *aorists* and his *solls* and *wirds*, heaven knows, but it was the pictures of the wine-dark sea and of the Rhine maidens which gave him what he craved. The best of Germany he brought back with him. The old German sentiment and almost naive simplicity, the music of ballad and of organ, an old idealistic philosophy and a love for a natural life such as he had always lived. Yes, he loved the natural life. To the camp up in Lake Champlain, where in the summer he loved to go, there belonged a large number of professors and students, an occasional college president, and a Governor of the State, and one of them writes to me: "There never was a member whose arrival was more cordially welcomed than that of Prof. Higley; not for his skill as a hunter or fisherman, nor for his efficiency as a sailor or as a cook, but because of his charming character, his absolute sincerity, his loyal friendship, his unassuming good sense, his rare talent as a singer and a writer of admirable songs for special occasions."

They showed me once in the old house in Castleton an elbow *melodeon*—a huge thing with keys which you hold in your lap and pump with your elbow while you play. Every year during the war when the army went into winter quarters, that melodeon was sent to Mr. Higley, and every spring when the army took the field it came back home again. It is a pleasant picture that you have of the soldiers sitting about the winter camp fire, while young Higley played and sang to them and led them in the chorus. Singularly human, singularly lovable he was, up to the last. "I saw him last," a graduate wrote to me, "about a month before he died, and we discussed the prospects of that year's baseball nine as keenly as we should have discussed it in the old days thirty years ago."

Music, I say, was in his blood. But it was fated that music should be his avocation, his rest and inspiration, rather than the real work of his life. He went back to his old college in 1872 and for ten years he taught Greek and German there—a great favorite with all in the community, so the ex-President of the college told me. Then he had two wonderful years of study at German universities, and then in 1885 Groton found him back in America teaching his beloved music, and asked him to come here. From that autumn in 1885 until the day in 1916, when too late, with strength overtaxed by persistent work and risks too long taken, he went to bed with the fatal illness, for more than 30 years he devotedly and untiringly taught boys—boys and masters too. Many a one of us on the Faculty could tell you of how often he had gone with some hard question to Mr. Higley for help, and of how he had never failed to get it.

He was a very great and a very learned scholar; but as his memory recedes farther into the distance, we find ourselves thinking not so much of brilliant intellect as of his rare soul. He was the sort of man that strengthens our belief in immortality. Death in connection with one like him seems impotent and cheap. He worked untiringly and unselfishly for others while he was here—we are sure that he is working untiringly and unselfishly for others now that he is over there. We used to go to him for help—some day we shall go to him again for help, for the help that he will again be so ready and so able to give. Meantime, with the help of his example we will try to make more out of our lives, to be of more use to our fellow-men, and to serve better the God whom he served so well.